**3 Identity, inequality and social class: what it is to be poor**

**3.1 ‘Making ends meet’**

When you say that someone is ‘poor’, what do you mean?

Do people whom others call ‘poor’ always see themselves in that way?

One group whose identities are greatly constrained by income are the poor. But, as the questions above suggest, poverty is not a simple fact of some lives: rather, it is a concept with different meanings, and a label that we may accept or reject. This section considers how poverty shapes identity.

When people talk about being poor, they often talk about the difficulty of being able to ‘make ends meet’ on low incomes. The phrase evokes people's experience of the daily struggle to feed and clothe a family on very little money, to keep them warm, dry, clean and safe, and to do this without getting into debt or getting into trouble. Some low income families in the UK live on social security benefits alone and have very little other access to cash or formal sources of credit. The result is a very basic existence:

I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't go out, I don't eat meat. I have thought of getting rid of the TV but I can't because it's for [my son] … I think, ‘Shall I get rid of the cat?’ but I can't … There's absolutely nothing I spend money on except just surviving, you know, paying bills and buying food.

(quoted in Kempson, 1996, p. 49)

This quotation is drawn from a survey of life on low incomes in the early to mid 1990s (Kempson, 1996). The survey was based on 31 studies that had been funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The people interviewed in the studies were diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, geographical location and life experience. Kempson's survey concluded that people who had been ‘on benefits’ for a while generally faced a hard choice between going without essentials or falling behind with their bills for water, electricity, gas or rent. The longer people live on low incomes, the harder it gets to cope. Children grow, clothes wear out, appliances need replacing, school activities cost money, isolation gets worse because of lack of money to socialise, and health and mental energy are undermined. Kempson concluded that UK benefit rates in the early 1990s generally gave people insufficient money to cover even basic needs. As one benefit recipient said: ‘You're on the poverty line whichever way you look at it … Nobody can manage on £46 a week. You can't exist on that. You can't manage it. It's degrading’ (quoted in Kempson, 1996, p. 6).

Many low income households in the UK, however, do not claim state benefits. Many people live on low wages, and the extent of very low paid work increased in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Rowntree studies reported in Kempson, wages of £70–£90 a week for such full-time jobs as shop assistant, and around £100 for male manual jobs, were quite commonly reported.

So how much is enough to ‘make ends meet’? The Rowntree studies asked this question in a variety of ways. The people interviewed were asked how much money they needed to cover basic outgoings, to live on, to avoid the need to supplement low wages, to create a low likelihood of problem debt. The different calculations produced some remarkably similar answers despite the diversity of people interviewed. Single people reckoned that in the early 1990s they needed about £150 a week, or less if they were not a householder. Lone parents came up with a figure of around £180 a week. Couples with children needed around £200 to avoid arrears on bills. Many people on low wages were working long hours to try to bring their incomes up to these figures (Kempson, 1996).

The consistency of these estimates suggests that, in a particular time and place, there tends to be a shared view about what goods and services are necessities. The UK government also takes a view on this issue. It states that the level of Income Support – the basic benefit for adults – should be ‘the amount needed to bring their income up to their “applicable amount”. This is the level the law says they need to live on’ (DSS, 1997, p. 21). Income Support payments vary according to family circumstances and housing costs. The number of people living at or below the Income Support ‘poverty line’ is frequently used as one definition of those counted as ‘poor’ in the UK. The Rowntree studies showed that by the early 1990s these benefit payments had fallen below a social consensus on the level that was necessary.



**Figure 3:** Possilpark is one of the most deprived areas in Scotland